

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN AN AGE OF PLURALISM

The topic is broad and will suggest different things to different people.

It could take us in a variety of directions. What I intend to do, therefore, is to make a number of statements, not necessarily coherent in outline, and then we will go in whatever direction that you want to take the conversation.

1. The human race has always been pluralized, only we didn't know it as long as we lived in isolated, homogenous communities. We become conscious of pluralism when some event or combination of events break down that isolation.

Migration

Conquest

Economic expansion -- the lure of new opportunity.

Differentiation - specialization - interdependence.

(The rise of trade in the Middle Ages.)

Common problems which require joint problem-solving.

All of these forces are at work in this "age of pluralism." In fact, I cannot think of a time when more such forces were operating at the same time, more powerfully, or affecting more people in the world at the same time.

2 —
One of the universal ironies of history is that events which draw people together, or throw them together, as the case may be, are fraught with both danger and opportunity; and they draw out both the best and worst responses of which human beings are capable. I can make a case for observing that instantaneous, global and visual communication has done at least as much to divide peoples and cultures as to draw them together.

Fundamentalism as a response to pluralism, value-displacement.

2. It is inviting to think of pluralism on a global scale, in terms of the interactions between nations and cultural traditions; but pluralism operates also at a more and more local level.

The racial interaction is obvious.

Generational separation -- value conflicts.

The general good made subordinate to personal advantage.

Not only the youth are guilty of this one: it operates at all age levels.

Life-style divergences. Even the language and codes of courtesy which are considered appropriate and "civilized."

I wonder if it is too much to say that "pluralism" exists at the individual interpersonal level, if not, indeed, inside each one of us.

3. Christian Mission:

Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel."

The wonderful and dangerous idea of the world as one "household."

oikoumene - ecumenical.

The Greek idea of the "oikoumene" as the civilized, i.e. Greek-speaking, world. Quite different from the Christian use of the term. It implies that culturally all "civilized" people speak and act alike. Alexander.

Paul, who understood pluralism, had quite a different view. He recognized that people could respond to Christ in different ways and worship him in different languages, order their communal life by differing disciplines.

The lesson has to be recovered from time to time, because we are plagued by the notion that all Christians ought to look like ourselves, whoever "we" may be. Generations of missionaries started with the idea that the evidence of conversion was to adopt European-style dress.

5. 6. Mission and Cultural Imperialism.

Missions, throughout history, have often been either the innocent or not-so-innocent agents of imperialism. Certainly, they have often been guilty of cultural imperialism.

"Hispanidad" and the conquest of Latin America.

In Asia and Africa "God is an Englishman."

The "Younger Churches" have, indeed, become the older churches in their own countries and are often the "Establishment" in those countries.

One of the exciting new developments is the emergence of indigenized Christian Churches. *A correlative of independence movements.*

7. The Future:

Christianity has a message for the world. In its basic form, it is less bound to place and time and culture than any of the world faiths. Proclamation of the message, however, requires an openness to the world, a willingness to listen, to respond, and to be enriched by the insights that come from other cultures. Sometimes these are closer to the original Gospel than our own refined versions.

Openness and dialogue require confidence. We need to know where we stand. We need to have an identity of our own. Without that confidence, we are once again driven to argue on the basis of the superficials.

4. Mission and the Ecumenical Movement:

With the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent emergence of denominations, a problem arose in the mission fields of Asia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands: "Which Christianity?" which often even looked like a question of "Which Christ?" Resolving that question in the field led to movements toward new dialogue between the home churches and toward actual church union. That movement has lost its impetus and that may be the result, in part, of the loss of momentum in the missionary movement itself.

Actually, what we know as the "ecumenical movement" had three roots: the missionary movement, represented importantly by the Church of South India and Bishop Leslie Newbegin; the World Conference on Faith and Order, growing out of the turmoil of the First World War (William Temple and Nathan Soderblom); and the World Student Christian Federation. All of these are, in their individual ways, expressions of Christian Mission.

65. Mission and Pluralism:

The ecumenical movement did not solve the problem of expanding the Christian mission across cultural lines. It gave birth to the concept of the Younger Churches, and we in the Presbyterian Church changed our terminology from "Missionary" to "Fraternal Worker." Those changes, I feel were largely cosmetic, because -- at least so far as the parent churches were concerned, the Younger Churches were expected to look a lot like the "Older" ones. Mission organizations tend to be conservative.

The indigenized churches:

*Africa: Church of the Lord Aladura
Cheshum and Seraphim Society*

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